

Young women's experience with mainstream pornography.

“IF STUDIES OF MALE CONSUMERS OF PORNOGRAPHY ARE SCARCE, RESEARCH THAT FOCUSES ON WOMEN AS ACTIVE USERS OF PORNOGRAPHY ARE PRACTICALLY NON-EXISTENT.” ATTWOOD (2005)

Definition

- Kipnis's (1996) definition of the word breaks it down into two words derived from Latin. 'Porno' that means prostitute and 'Graphos' that translates into 'talking about' or 'writing about'. The literal meaning of the word thus was established at the time as the narratives around prostitution.
- Some supposedly neutral definitions tried to move away from the literal definition of pornography by narrowing the meaning of the word as any form of representation of sexual behaviors, thus restricting the definition of pornography as a medium used for the purpose of sexual illustration.
- Ciclitira (2002) contested this simplification because it removed pornography from its historical place. She argued that its historical heritage is that of the systematic degradation and objectification of women and by failing to refer to the historical context of the term you are explicitly harming women's social struggle for equality.
- "as the explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings."

Second Wave critique

- A powerful critique of pornography has historically emanated from feminist writing. Pornography's popularity and mass appeal has always sparked a strong debate around its implications, with most notable the 70s and 80s 'Porn Wars'.
- Dworkin (1981), "[Pornography: Men Possessing Women](#)". claimed that the acts of mistreatment of women that are frequently represented in pornographic material should be regarded as criminal acts prosecuted by the law. She claimed that the male consumer of pornography understands and relates to the material by identifying and approving over his acclaimed power to objectify and demean women.

Well renowned feminists at the time such as Ellen Willis and Pat Califia (Brownmiller, 2000) abandoned the anti-porn movement as they supported the notion that it facilitated the silencing of the diversity of the feminist critiques on pornography rather than demystifying the discussion around female sexuality (Wilson ,1992).

- Therefore, what Wilson suggests is that censoring pornographic material does not help in the fight against women's repression but it instead facilitates in reproducing the stereotypes that these representations create. Thus this study is a response to these critiques that promote future research to move away from what Juffer (1998) refers to as a "tired binary" (p.2); where the attempts to decipher the meanings of pornography have been static; moving around a debate where pornographic representations have specific meanings that perpetuate oppressive relations between genders.

Inspiring Psychological Research

- One positive aspect of Dworkin's anti-pornography movement has been to ignite an academic psychological interest in pornography research. Despite the criticisms of her work; her insights have been persistent and the main themes of her work seem to systematically resurface when issues of pornographic representation arise. This has inspired the social psychological research for the last three decades in exploring the effects that pornographic material have on its users (Smith, 2007).
- The focus of the research was trying to establish whether pornography was causing men to be violent and demeaning towards their female counterparts.
- The participants exposed to violent images reported less sympathy towards rape victims and an increase in violent fantasies. Participants exposed to non-violent pornographic images reported a higher dissatisfaction towards their female partner's sexual performance and appearance (Trotter, 1999).

Limitations of the Research

- Most of the research that measured the participants' arousal failed to distinguish between physiological and psychological arousal (Hardy, 1998).
- Critiques around the methodologies were raised when the recorded aggressive tendencies were based on self-report questionnaires that were described as reductive and simplistic.
- This consequently resulted in the systematic 'othering' of the consumers of pornography and their account were instead being de-emphasised and narrowed down to academic disputes that were lacking the essential ecological validity.

Qualitative research on Women

- Beth Eck (2003): Men's responses when shown images of women were mostly focused on reproducing heterosexual masculine standards, by judging the level of desirability of the female models.

A notable difference when compared to the female participants was that even though women assumed a judgmental position they were also self-critical and compared the models body parts with their own.
- Shaw (2009): The women expressed their concerns of whether sexually explicit material where creating certain expectations of *sexual availability* and their role in *perpetuating a culture of objectification towards women*.
- In both pieces, pornographic material was considered a form of entertainment for men with negative implications to female self-esteem. Women did not seem to relate with the material in any sexual manner since they classified it as violent and embarrassing.

- Petra Boynton's (1999) : "Hierarchy of attractiveness"

The amateur models were usually described with the most derogatory remarks and their willingness to be part of the photoshoots was regarded with skepticism. Professional models on the other hand were considered with a higher regard and at the same time seemed to cause a higher level of anxiety in regards to their own appearance.

In essence, their concerns were clearly focused on the aesthetic dimensions of the explicit images in contrast to the ethical concerns of female objectification that were observed in other research. One interpretation of these findings is the overpowering effect of the 'male gaze', which has deemed the participants unable to focus on the possible adverse effects that these representations have on a greater social dimension.

“Paradigm Shift” in Research

- The given research were conducted from a quantitative perspective, utilizing questionnaires and ‘tick box’ responses to derive data from their participants. These methods are limited because they do not offer any flexibility for the participant to argue, debate, and restructure their responses ‘in their own words’.
- A new wave of studies and theoretical renegotiations emerged that was considered as a part of a ‘paradigm shift’ (Attwood, 2007) in pornographic research. Attwood argues that this wave of research attempts to approach pornographic material as a dynamic cultural agent by which women construct their sexual identities.

- Petzanova (2007): the women expressed their concern for the lack of academic rigor in issues of practical and political nature that arise with the presence of porn in their lives. For some women, porn was seen as a tool for sexual education used to inform their sexual practices and fantasies. For other women pornography was pivotal in developing their sexual identity by using the material as a masturbation tool.
- Yet again in Bhom et al.'s (2014) study, women expressed issues of cognitive dissonance in response to their ethical disapproval of the pornographic images. They found themselves angry and overwhelmed by the treatment of women in the industry, yet expressed a confusion in being stimulated by the same material that they condemned as being sexist.

- Kovacs (2004): the participants raised the lack of diversity in pornographic material as an important limitation and were more **vocal about the lack of positive female sexual representation**. Overall, women in this study made use of mainstream sexually explicit material to fulfill their sexual needs and claimed that porn was a way for them to **explore their sexualities autonomously**. Kovacs ethnographic work is important in understanding how pornography used in solitary settings was crucial in the attainment of “inspiring” information in regards to the participant’s sexualities.
- Interestingly Liberman’s (2015) study seem to be relevant to the issues raised in Kovacs’ study since her research was focused on feminist pornography explicitly. Her sample was comprised of feminist users and producers with focus groups debating around the current state and progress of feminist pornography. *One of the most significant topics addressed in the research are the different dimensions in which feminist porn could progress to deal with the current limitation of mainstream pornography.*

- Clarissa Smith's (2009) work is pivotal in her approach of the female attitudes toward pornography research because it raises questions of gender performativity. This widens the discussions on sexual representation by showing that men can also be the 'object' of desire and that women are active consumers of sexually explicit material.
- Thus Smith uses the term "orientations to pornography" when examining the participants' attitudes "in a significance to their understanding of themselves, their pleasures, the sexual pleasures of others, the social, economic, medical and cultural place of sexuality, the imbrications of pornography in sexuality etc." (2007, p.227).

Data Analysis:

Table 4. Superordinate themes and their constituent parts identified in the interview transcripts

- 1. Pornography as a Facilitator for the Development of a Sexual Identity-**
First exposure, Educational Attributes, Used with friends and spouses.
- 2. Fantasy vs Reality-** Sex in Porn is Real sex, Sex in Porn is not Real Sex.
- 3. Attitudes on the Pornographic Industry-** Material of Preference, Ethical Dichotomy.

Superordiante theme 1 : Pornography as a Facilitator for the Development of a Sexual Identity

- First exposure:

Research suggests that about 30% of first encounters with pornography happen accidentally.

Curiosity seems to have been the main cause of first exposure for my participants. Contrary to what research has shown (Cantor et al., 2003), the first contact with pornography was not met with disgust and the participants have shown interest and willingness to explore the material in their own. For example:

“When I first started it was out of curiosity. I was pressing on every video I could find on the main page.” (Christine)

“I would say around probably the last year of primary school and I didn’t just accidentally just stumble upon it, it was more like me out of curiosity or someone send it to me I can’t really remember.” (Rachel)

Nada was the only participant that recalled a rather negative first encounter with pornography but what was different compared to the other cases is that she was forcefully exposed to it.

“I must have been like 14 or 15 like in high school when you become aware of these things. Some boys in my class were trying to get the girls watch videos on their phone, to make us feel uncomfortable. I think that’s where you get the idea that porn is disgusting.” (Nada)

She did not have any control over the situation and it was done by people that she did not trust either. She also distinguishes that pornography is not inherently ‘disgusting’ but rather it was the conditions and manner that she first had contact with the material that was problematic.

- Educational attributes:

Women are mostly taught on how to manage male sexual desire but are not educated on how to handle their own urge (Lesko, 2003) or as Jess stated the emphasis is drawn on how to protect themselves from pregnancy instead of providing an understanding of their sexual development.

“Yeah a little bit but it wasn’t really detailed, it was general, like the basic. How to protect yourself from pregnancy and that sort of stuff. The school was really old fashioned I think they were scared to speak about porn.” (Jess)

- Jess’ account is interesting because it exposes how a harm-based approach was implemented as part of the sexual education of the female students. It functions as part of a culture that disempowers women by scaring them away from their sexual desires.

Also, two of the participants stated that they started using porn at the same period as they started having sex just so they would get inspired and informed. For example:

“...so I would say I would watch porn every time I would have sex or before, just to get some idea to kick it off...” (Mary)

“I think definitely when I first started watching it, because it was around the time I started having sex with my boyfriend so I think back then yeah, I was watching it so when I have sex I would know what was going on.” (Rachel)

Using pornography in an educational manner was extensively documented, with research showing that women did not only reach to porn to understand the mechanics of sex but was also used as an educational tool where one can learn by observing and choosing which sexual practises they deemed affirmative.

■ Friends and Spouses:

“(Porn use) It’s not very consistent at all. Umm and if I’m in a relationship I would rarely watch porn really.” (Nada)

“I’m in a long distance relationship so when I’m with him I don’t really need to watch porn but when I’m back home it averages once or twice a week really, but sometimes it could be less.” (Rachel)

These extracts support that porn can be used to increase sexually autonomy by providing control to a woman as to when and where she can enjoy herself sexually. This is commonly reported in similar studies that have shown that women that used pornography as a substitute for sex have shown levels of increased self-esteem and less anxiety when asked to speak about their sexual lives (Kovacs, 2004).

“I watched it with some friends. I had sex at a young age so when they started having sex later in the year they would come and ask me ‘what to do, how to do this?’ So I was like watch porn, for educational purposes sometimes just to sit down and talk about I don’t know, other female bodies, dick sizes whatever doesn’t matter it’s fun.” (Mary)

Here Mary seemed to have inspired a collective discussion around sex, using pornography as a medium. She recommends porn to her friends as a way of alleviating anxiety regarding sexual intercourse.

Its cultural value is evident here since it goes beyond the sphere of the sexual, while being manifested as a form of social interaction. This seems to help Mary and her friend to form stronger bonds between them and facilitate their communication about their sexualities. This in essence allows the women to engage in a dialogue about their sexual desires.

This process as described by Smith (2007) allows them to challenge the borders of normality in a collective manner. Pornography is clearly used as a medium of sexual empowerment.

Superordinate theme 2 : Reality vs Fantasy

■ *Sex in Porn is Real Sex:*

“Some things in porn might seem extreme but if you do feel like you need it as a woman then you should definitely go for it, doesn’t matter if you are not male or on the other side is very good to be in touch with this thing cz (because) then you know, you can say ‘I don’t like this’, ‘I’m not feeling ok with that’, might be rape or might be anything, whatever.” (Christine)

Here Christine shows that the more she was exposed to pornographic material the more she was able to understand her own preferences and her limits and at the same time she urges other women to do so. She believes that using pornographic material can help someone become more tolerant and acceptant of the multiplicity of sexual expression. Furthermore, she continues by making a strong claim on how the virtual experience of sex that is offered in porn could account as rape prevention. Her claim assumes that porn could help someone distinguish on what is acceptable and what is not and react more readily in a case of a sexual harassment.

“Yeah there was an expectation from me and I just followed that expectation. So sex wasn’t really about my pleasure it was just for his. I thought it was just normal because of the porn I watched as well like and I thought that it was ok that he wouldn’t make me come and I always made him come and I thought that that’s the way it was.” (Rachel)

It seems that the lack of representation of female arousal has made Rachel believe that fulfilling her sexual needs was of secondary importance or possibly was of no importance at all. This issue has appeared in research as the ‘male sexual needs’ discourse that privileges male sexual satisfaction and creates issues of consent for women.

Nada seems to agree with Rachel since she believes that the level of performativity in pornographic films is mostly repelling and she seems to have a hard time finding material that are stimulating:

“I normally always look for like I don’t know porn that looks that they are having sex to have fun like they are both enjoying it. But if I start watching something that is obviously too dominating by the man I won’t watch it I’ll look for something else.” (Nada)

- **Sex in Porn is not Real Sex:**

“I mostly enjoy things that I will never do but in real life I prefer sweet and romantic stuff what you’d call vanilla sex (laughter). But in porn I enjoy exactly the opposite the nasty and demeaning. Sometimes I watch things that the woman is the aggressor and vice versa.” (Christine)

This response from Christine shows that women do enjoy the advantage offered by pornography of being able to entertain sexual fantasy scenarios without having to experience them in real life. Furthermore Christine expands on the issue by distinguishing that she does feel dichotomised about being aroused from images that she would consider unacceptable and would by no means attempt in real life:

“What I mean is that I would never wanna experience this in real life, not even a threesome. Like seriously I would never wanna do that, or I wouldn’t do it for ethical reasons. It get me hot though looking at these things but I never ask for them.” (Christine)

“I do know one of my friends’ boyfriends is addicted to porn and now he can’t come when he has sex, like he is genuinely like wanked too much to porn and it’s like completely fucked him up because he broke up with my friend because of her weight. He has this whole idealistic vision of what sex should be and like the woman that you can get in the room and what they should look like and that kind of, obviously from my personal experience is the closest thing that I have so yeah its completely addictive and it distorts so many young males views on sex and young females too.” (Nada)

Nada’s claim in this extract, even though it is not personal, presents an experience that challenges the effects that pornography can have on someone’s fantasy. Nada’s claim supports that overexposure to the ‘idealistic’ standards of pornography can have a negative influence that may critically alter young people’s romantic relationships; a view that has been widely researched from a number of advocates against pornography (Paul, 2006; Wilson 2015).

Superordinate theme 3: Attitudes on the Pornographic Industry

■Material of Preference:

Most of the participants showed a preference for lesbian pornography, by stating that it was not so much a matter of preference but more of an issue of lack of material that they deemed as satisfying, both ethically and aesthetically:

“Usually lesbian porn that’s what I would go for, lesbian or threesome. I don’t really like the hetero-porn because it’s mostly focused on the man and its not that interesting they are not having, its not mutual pleasure and it doesn’t do anything for me” (Rachel)

Rachel for example has observed that the heterosexual material available are clearly constructed to appeal to a male audience. Nada’s position strengthens this point by stating that even though she prefers hetero-normative porn she would resort for lesbian porn just because that is the only material that she deems as being tailored for her pleasure.

“Normally I would just go for like male female kind of having sex. But sometime I would go for lesbian porn mainly because female to male sex is focused on the man and lesbian porn is focused on the woman which is how I envision myself as I watch it” (Nada)

Interestingly one of the participants focused on how the improvement of the aesthetical value of pornographic material was directly related to a more egalitarian representation of the woman involved since the subject-object relationship during the sexual act was interchangeable:

“It did happen though to me once I found a really good porn movie with my boyfriend. The cinematography and all were amazing there was a lot of effort put to make it look like art and at the same time try to represent the woman’s viewpoint, I can still recall some specific close-ups on the mans’ face while he was coming.” (Christine)

“Culture of Industry” Adorno (2001)

- Ethical Dichotomies:

“Yeah and I suppose its an industry that’s really fucked up. And I try to avoid things like that and I actively try to do good things in the world or like in my life so maybe contributing to that wouldn’t be something that I approve.” (Nada)

These strong opposing feelings that she is experiencing have been repeatedly observed in past research (Ciclitira, 2004; Liberman, 2015; Smith, 2007; Attwood; 2005) as an issue that is part of a greater social problem faced by many women. Specifically Ciclitira (2004) when researching feminist women’s attitudes she observed that the feminist debate has been stalled and inert *partly* due to the ethical inadequacies of mainstream pornography. Thus pornography was often vilified due to the lack of any constructive alternatives, this was an issue that has substantially paralysed the debate around the development of sexually explicit material suitable for women.
